DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 151 860 CS 204 060

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TITLE Photographs, Foxfire, and Flea-Markets.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (8th, San Antonio, Texas, March 31-April 2, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Literature; *Childrens Literature; Higher Education; Integrated Activities; *Literature Appreciation; Oral History; Photographs; *Teaching Techniques; United States History
IDENTIFIERS *Foxfire; *Wilder (Laura Ingalls)

ABSTRACT

An introductory literature course for college sophomores focuses on children's "classics," based on the premise that no book good for children is for children only. This document describes an approach to teaching the "Little House in the Big Woods" series of children's books. Three techniques are suggested for confirming the realism of these descriptive reminiscences by broadening student awareness of the past: (1) examination of early photographs provides visual representations of Wilder's verbal images; (2) use of "Foxfire," an interview technique, links students with the reality of the past through conversations with elderly persons who can recall historic events; and (3) field trips to flea markets for antique items can present college students with concrete evidence of history. (MAI)

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Mary Buckley

# PHOTOGRAPHS, FOXFIRE, AND FLEA-MARKETS

W.H. Auden and I agree that there is no such thing as a good book for children which is only for children. Auden has been promoted, but I still teach Introduction to Literature, and I need all the help I can get. I like to teach "children's classics" in my sophomore classes. Books are neither written nor read in a vaccuum, so I find it useful to expand or create a context for these books in any way that I can. One complex of ways which I have enjoyed using to enrich my own--and my students'-- reading of Laura Ingalls Wilder's "Little House" books is Photographs, Foxfire, and Flea-Markets.

Little House in the Big Woods is the first in a series of eight volumes of reminiscences of the childhood of Laura Ingalls. Born in 1867 in the woods of Wisconsin, she travelled in a covered wagon with her homesteading family back and forth across Indian Territory, finally settling in the Dakota Territory when she was an adolescent. Laura (Ingalls) Wilder wrote the books when she was an old lady, living on her farm near Mansfield, Missouri. In the eight volumes of the series, she lovingly recalled, with an incredible amount of precise detail, what life was like for a child in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. As one social critic has observed, a fascination with how things are done characterizes the American mind. Laura Ingalls Wilder embodied this fascination with technique in her minute and practical recollections of how a variety of

household tasks--now done either invisibly, externally, or not at all--were accomplished on the pioneer homestead. How to make cheese, hats, rag dolls, curtains, candles, soap, door hinges, bread, butter, sheets. How do you keep ice? How do you thresh wheat? It is all there. The "Little House" books began appearing in the 1930's. Children have been cherishing them ever since because they talk about fascinating things in a fascinating way. (There are no boring subjects; there are only boring writers.)

The fascination remains, no matter how old the reader, and old photographs supply delightful corroboration. The availability of a (relatively) cheap and (relatively) simple camera in the mid-nineteenth century induced a craze of amateur photography which brought iconographic immortality to the common person. The camera confers random and equal immortality on whatever it sees, and it sees unselectively. Painting as an art is selective and occasional, and therefore--almost by definition--incapable of recording the minutiae which actually constitute living. The camera changed that. Molly Holden's poem "Photograph of Haymaker, 1890," focusses on the sudden sense of life's brevity which candid photographs can produce:

> It is not so much the image of the man
> that's moving--he pausing from his work
> to whet his scythe, trousers tied below
> the knee, white shirt lit by another
> summer's sun, another century's--as the
> sight of the grasses beyond his last
> laid swathe, so living yet upon the
> moment previous to death; for as the
> man stooping straightened up and bent
> again they died before his blade. Sweet
> hay and gone some seventy years ago and

yet they stand before me in the sun,
stems damp still where their neighbours'
fall uncovered them, succulent and straight,
immediate with moon-daisies.

The Victorians--English and American-- took up the camera enthusiastically, and recorded everything in sight. Lewis Carroll--an enthusiastic amateur photographer himself--even wrote a poem, "Hiawatha's Picture Taking," in which the apparatus of photography is described. Millions of the pictures thus taken--many of them on glass plates-- have lain mouldering in attics, albums, and junk shops. The recent nostalgic interest in America's past has resurrected them; and many albums are being published which give a vivid impression of life in the late nineteenth century. The impression of reality is intensified by the pictures' lack of "significance." These images were made because the things were, not because they were important.

The published books of photographs usually impose special themes on the plethora of random immortality. Wisconsin Death Trip, for example, is an iconoclastic album of lunacy, arson, and early death in small town Wisconsin in the 1880's and '90's. Hometown U.S.A. is a more loving look at smalltown life in the same epoch. Both books--but particularly the second--offer photographic confirmation of Laura Wilder's recollections. There were few cameras on the prairies--although smalltown studio portraits of Laura's family do survive--she had a sharp and observing eye.

Her observation was sharpened by the necessity of being the eyes for her beloved sister Mary, who was blind. Many of the scenes which Laura recalled are paralleled in the published photographs. As the editor of Hometown U.S.A. observes, there was considerable homogeneity of smalltown experience, whether the town was in New Hampshire or on the prairie.

For example, in Little House in the Big Woods, Laura devotes two chapters to sugaring off. Her description of the apparatus and procedure exactly matches a photograph of New Hampshire children in Hometown U.S.A.

Laura Ingalls was a rural child, isolated in a sense that even country-bred children of today cannot comprehend. She writes, for example, that before her first visit to a town (Lake Pepin,Wisconsin) when she was six, she had never seen two houses together. Hometown U.S.A. includes many photographs of small town main streets, which almost certainly resemble the Lake Pepin which Laura saw--and was terrified of; and the photograph of a general store closely approximates the one she describes.

Useful as the published photographs are, they are not necessary. Old family photographs offer an even better way to not only confirm Laura's descriptions, but also to remind students that what Laura wrote about is not far distant from the experience of living generations--if not parents', then grandparents', or great-grand-parents', or the next door neighbors'.

It only takes seven generations to get back to the American Revolution. This sort of sheer mechanical linking can be done with family photographs. For instance, my son's grandmother was six years old in 1903 when the photograph on our wall was taken. (There were then plenty of people still alive who had known people who knew George Washington.) Grandma and her brother are wearing clothes which their mother had made, as Laura's mother made hers. The little girl is wearing the high button shoes which Laura wore, and hated. She is also sporting the long "banana curls" which Laura's sister Mary could achieve, and for which Laura longed. Grandma's mother was Laura Ingalls' exact contemporary.

So what?

This use of family pictures to illustrate what Laura Ingalls Wilder described does two things. It confirms the realism of the books, but it also reminds the reader of where he or she fits on the family tree, or simply within the human family.

"Foxfire" is my second source of additional material. The idea of Foxfire has spread from Rabun Gap, Georgia, to schools all over the country. The Dallas Morning News, for example, carried a long feature in the Spring of 1976 on "Student Historians at Work," describing a Foxfire project in Gary, Texas. "Foxfire" is named for the Rabun Gap

High School magazine where the technique was begun. An English teacher assigned his students to interview local old people on "how things used to be." The students learned and preserved much about ways of life that are rapidly disappearing. The project was so popular both with students and with the interviewees that it eventually turned into four (so far) best-selling volumes: Foxfire I,II,III, and IV. Like all good ideas, it sounds relatively simple-minded when formulated, but it works.

Information, both practical and anecdotal, used to be passed on from grandfather to grandchild. As technological change has accelerated, the practicality of the information declined. And, as the generations have become increasingly isolated, the transmission disappeared too. "Foxfire" re-establishes it. Students can talk to elderly relatives, neighbors, acquaintances, about things which interest them in "The Little House." (One does have to be careful of the definition of elderly. I had one student inquire if his mother would be a satisfactory old person. "She's thirty-eight.") The project has two-sided benefits. My neighbor (a sprightly 75) once remarked that she wished she could write a book about all the things that she has known. E. Nesbit summarized the same wish in her poem, "The Things That Matter":

Now that I've nearly done my days,
    And grown too stiff to sweep or sew,
I sit and think till I'm amaze,
About what lots of things I know:
Things as I've found out one by one--
    And when I'm fast down in the clay,
My knowing things and how they're done
    Will all be lost and thrown away.

Not all lost and thrown away, if "Foxfire" is encouraged. Introduction to Literature students can be encouraged to write letters to grandparents, great-grand-parents, and--in a few lucky families--the chain goes back even farther. In many families, there is one member who takes pride in being the family historian and repository of lore. "Oh, ask Uncle Fred about that. He knows." Where family inquiries are impossible, there are always visits to elderly neighbors, or to the nursing home. Students learn things in the most interesting possible way, and it isn't always history they learn. As one surprised and touched sophomore quarterback told me: "I didn't realize it until afterwards, but I brightened up that old man's day."

"Foxfire" does not aim at preserving the extraordinary events. "Life," as somebody remarked "is so daily." And it is the dailiness that both Foxfire and Laura Wilder aim at. Her especial gift was in putting it all down--the red flannel scraps in the bottom of the kerosene lamp, her mother's handprint on the cornbread "to sweeten it." Most people of her generation, or a little later, would have much the same recollections, if they could be produced. For example,

Laura Wilder's recollection of the endless Sunday afternoons of her childhood, when no playing or amusements were allowed, is echoed in this recollection of my father's of his Sundays in Illinois around 1903: "We lived . . . . in a Protestant section of Monmouth. The Sabbath was a day of reflection to them, and my parents went along with them, and all playing outside was taboo on Sundays. If you wanted to play, you had to walk out into the country away from the reproving eyes of the Protestants. There were no movies, no radio, no. T.V., and no swimming pools. The days were endless."

Local history is another wonderful source for secondary Foxfire. The John Neely Bryant cabin, which was built in 1841, is preserved near down town Dallas, and is open for visits all summer. In Texas--and probably in most states--Pioneer Days flourish in the spring and summer, and offer excellent opportunities to experience nineteenth century domesticity. Last spring, for example, my children dipped candles and churned butter at the Heard Museum in McKinney. While I was examining a display of nineteenth century cobbler's tools, the little girl next to me exclaimed "Those are just like the ones in Farmer Boy!" Farmer Boy is the book in which Laura Wilder tells of her husband's boyhood in upstate New York. Several chapters of the book are devoted to the visit of an itinerant boot-maker to the Wilder farm.

As Pamela Travers observed in her essay "Only Connect": "Thinking is linking. . . to connect the individual with the community. . . to relate the past to the present and both to the future." That child in McKinney was connecting, and so can literature students. The newspapers are full of possibilities for field trips. But the trips need not be to a festival, nor even to an out-of-the-way place. Most towns, large or small, cherish at least one early house. Greenville, for instance, is our county seat. There, in the city park, you can visit the Ende-Gailliard house, which was built in 1859. Inside,it is furnished with the furniture and artifacts of its own day, as well as many local photographs and documents. On the walls hang pictures of people, whose names are familiar on streets and building cornices. Moulton, Neyland, Walworth, Harrison--names which were only street signs suddenly become people. Examining local history helps in establishing community roots, and also makes historical facts "real." In a cabinet of odds and ends in the parlour, for instance, there is a tattered bill of sale, dated 1859, for a twelve year old Black boy. Reading about slavery can never have quite the intensity of seeing that casual scrap of paper.

The ultimate field trip in connection with the "Little House" books is, of course, the trip to Mansfield,Missouri. Here, at Rocky Ridge Farm, where Laura and Almanzo Wilder lived, and where the "Little House" books were written, the house, which Almanzo built, is maintained as the Laura Ingalls Wilder-Rose Wilder Lane Museum. The visitor can see Pa's violin, Mary's little parlour organ, and many of the domestic articles about which Mrs. Wilder wrote. The trip is wonderfully interesting, but not absolutely essential. There are many substitutes.

One good substitute is a visit to the flea markets which thrive in many small towns--and even some urban areas. Here in East Texas, the flea markets are mostly modelled on Canton First Monday, where attics are cleared out for public sale. At a typical flea market, you can pick up anything from a mongrel puppy(with or without fleas) to barbed wire samples or pressed glass pickle dishes. Many of these items have sat in attics almost since the days when Laura wrote about similar items in her own houses.

But it need not even be somebody else's attic which is ransacked. Family detritus--too homely to be called heirlooms--can illuminate the "Little House." My neighbor grows geraniums in the kettle her mother used to make soap. Hair receivers and hatpin holders still adorn some dressers. On a slightly more elegant level, there are the objects

which were valued in their own time and passed on. On my wall hangs a wooden bracket which my great-uncle carved in the 1890's. It is almost identical to the one which Laura describes, which her father carved one Christmas for Ma.

These, then are my three principal sources for enriching the "Little House" books for college students, or for any reader. With Pamela Travers, I believe in connecting: of the past with the present, and of books with life. Such a connecting was, I think, in Laura Ingalls Wilder's mind when she began the recollection of her childhood with the classic fairy tale formula, "Once upon a time, sixty years ago, a little girl lived in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, in a little grey house made of logs." And she concluded that volume, a year in Laura's life later, with the child's sleepy dialogue with Pa, who had been playing "Auld Lang Syne" on his fiddle:

> When the fiddle had stopped singing Laura called out softly, "what are days of auld lang syn, Pa?"
>
> "They are the days of a long time ago, Laura," Pa said. "Go to sleep now."
>
> But Laura lay awake a little while, listening to Pa's fiddle, softly playing and to the lonely sound of the wind in the Big Woods....
>
> She thought to herself, "This is now." She was glad that the cosy house, and Ma and Pa and the firelight and the music were now. They could not be forgotten, she thought, because now is now. It can never be a long time ago.